The Case of Maurice “Rocket” Richard and the National Standards on Foreign Language Learning

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Given the close proximity of Canada to the United States and the increased economic ties among the United States, Canada and Mexico due to NAFTA and especially since Quebec is the largest trading partner of the United States, it is only natural that secondary and postsecondary curricula include the study of Quebec, Acadia and the other French-speaking regions of Canada in their curricula. Furthermore, with the reemergence of language reacquisition among the multiple Franco-American communities in the United States, specifically in New England and Louisiana, combined with the popularity of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, which capitalized on the U.S.-Canadian rivalry in both men’s and women’s ice hockey, educators can now more easily find ways for making the study of French relevant to today’s U.S. students. As more and more foreign language educators make the effort to incorporate the National Standards on Foreign Language Learning (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) into their classrooms, exploring Canada’s rich history, traditions, legends, literature and cinema provides the perfect opportunity for innovative curricular design that will appeal to students at all levels.

Unfortunately, traditional French language textbooks in the United States, particularly ones geared for the introductory level, rarely dedicate more than one chapter to Quebec and even less to the Franco-American communities in the United States and even far less to the other French-speaking regions of Canada. This article thus concentrates on how to develop interdisciplinary learning units on Maurice “Rocket” Richard, the legendary Montreal Canadians reluctant hero and cultural icon who to this day unifies all Canadians in their pride for their national winter sport. These units progress from the introductory levels, continue with the intermediate levels, and culminate with an advanced study of the Richard Riots of 1955, which were one of the catalysts for Quebec’s Révolution Tranquille, or “Quiet Revolution.”

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Le Chandail de hockey / The Hockey Sweater

CD-ROMs

Since 1996, the U.S. National Standards for Foreign Language Education, or the Five C’s, as they are more commonly known (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities), have represented a consensus among educators, business leaders, government, and the community on the definition and role of foreign language instruction in American education. As such, they have provided a framework upon which foreign language specialists have developed curricular units. One such example for the French classroom is Le Chandail de hockey. This enduring childhood autobiographical story by Roch Carrier, a highly celebrated French-Canadian author, is a perfect way to introduce American students to the special importance that ice hockey and team loyalty have for all Canadians. Le Chandail de hockey is a typical Canadian story, based on national icons and the universal notions of rivalry and friendship, as well as the Canadian cultural duality.

In Le Chandail de hockey, set in the 1940s in Sainte-Justine, a small rural town in Quebec, Carrier narrates a highly traumatic childhood event: as a young Montreal Canadian’s fan, he was forced to wear a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater instead of that of the beloved Montreal Canadian’s hero, Maurice “Rocket” Richard. For Carrier and his boyhood friends, life revolved around ice hockey. They worshiped Richard and they all wore his sweater with the famous number 9. In fact, for all French Canadians, ice hockey was a religion alongside Catholicism (Sunday was reserved for mass and Saturday evening for listening to the Montreal Canadians games on the radio). When Carrier outgrew his Richard sweater, his mother, who did not like the Eaton’s catalog order forms because they were written in English and she did not understand a single word of it, sent a letter in French to “Mr. Eaton”:

Cher Monsieur Eaton, auriez-vous l’amabilité de m’envoyer un chandail de hockey des Canadiens pour mon garçon qui a dix ans et qui est un peu trop grand pour son âge, et que le docteur Robitaille trouve un peu trop maigre? Je vous envoie trois piastres et retournez-moi le reste s’il en reste. J’espère que votre emballage va être mieux fait que la dernière fois.

Dear Monsieur Eaton, would you be so kind as to send me a Canadians’ hockey sweater for my son, Roch, who is ten years old and a little bit tall for his age? Docteur Robitaille thinks he is a little too thin. I am sending you three dollars. Please send me the change if there is any. I hope your packing will be better than it was last time.

Much to young Carrier’s dismay, when the Eaton’s package arrived, it contained a Toronto Maple Leaf’s sweater. His mother refused to return it for fear of insulting Monsieur Eaton. To add insult to injury, when Carrier headed to the ice to join his friends for their daily game, he was ostracized because of his sweater and not allowed to play with them, so beloved was Richard of the Montreal Canadians and so hated were the Toronto Maple Leafs. In shear frustration at the unfairness of the situation, young Carrier smashed his hockey stick on the ice, breaking it in two. He was then reprimanded by a priest and sent to church to pray, where, in praying, he asked to have his dreaded Maple Leaf sweater be eaten by moths (followed in his